

Founders Day Student Essay Contest 2018

First prize winner Zine Labidine Ghebouli

AUB, an Institution of Today's Leaders

In 2015, I was awarded the Middle East Partnership Initiative scholarship to pursue my higher education at the American University of Beirut. I was that young Algerian blogger and activist who wanted to make a change. I have always dreamt of taking part, along with other youth of my homeland, in leading my nation towards a prosperous future. AUB has offered me the opportunity to play that role and to express my controversial opinions without fear. However, a year later, I paid the price of my political stands. Even then, I owed AUB something more precious than freedom of expression; I owed AUB my survival. AUB did not give up on my dreams; it had provided me and still does with a haven where I could reconcile with myself and continue playing that role of a leader. Therefore, I believe my university could play a bigger role in the world.

Today, in the midst of all the challenges facing the MENA region, AUB has the tremendous responsibility to form a generation of leaders who would set the bases of change in their region and the world. The legacy of AUB inscribed within its mission statement which is to “serve the peoples of the Middle East and beyond” through creating a safe environment where freedom of expression and thought is guaranteed, diversity is treasured, and tolerance is cherished is of utmost necessity today. Wherefore comes the huge role that AUB could play in this region. Such a role would be achieved through a process of three pillars; fostering an open dialogue, constituting a bridge between cultures and breaking the financial barriers.

Since its establishment in 1866, AUB has been the leading institution in the region where people are granted their absolute right of freedom of expression and thought. This basic, yet fundamental, right represented one reason of choosing AUB. In an era where limitations on freedom of expression are significantly threatening democratic rule around the world and especially in the region, the defense of AUB for this inalienable right is more critical than ever before. It is crucial, so that AUB plays this role of a “leadership institution”, that it keeps its full and unconditional defense of basic freedoms. Leaders need to be heard, and for that, they need to speak. AUB must protect its students from all forms of censorship because it is this peaceful dialogue that could resolve the fiercest conflicts. It is my belief that the moment we start finding excuses for censoring people, we yield to the oppressor, betray our principals and threaten the region's future.

AUB has always been the voice of the peoples of the Middle East. It was Howard Bliss who advocated for the freedom of the Syrian and Lebanese peoples at the Paris

conference in 1919. Beyond that, 19 AUB alumni participated in the San Francisco Conference that had established the United Nations. Therefore, AUB has always been there, in most decisive moments, to provide an insightful perspective. Today, the region and the world are facing the most crucial turning point since the fall of the Berlin wall. During a time characterized by a dangerous polarization of the world, ongoing conflicts and extreme divisions, only clairvoyance could rebuild the unsightly ruptured relations. AUB, being one of the youth's voices in the Middle East, has the rightful duty to provide a fresh vision and to restore the trust between this region and the world. This duty could only be fulfilled through giving the students the opportunity of a frank dialogue with policy makers. In that sense, social sciences and humanities should be given the highest importance through a reform ensuring an increased value so that students are able to have a solid base when it comes to pressing matters. Furthermore, students should have the chance to engage with policy makers and their societies, something that Issam Fares Institute and the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service are exceling at; thus, these two entities shall be granted more continuous support and opportunities to further flourish. It is through these entities that AUB students will be the bridge linking the Middle East with the rest of world, this support is the basis of forming a generation of leaders who speak for their region instead of having others speaking in their name.

Moreover, this process will only have its effect if AUB pursues a more inclusive policy especially on the financial level. I come from a country where most of its population cannot afford a degree at AUB, I would have not been able to afford this university if I had not received a scholarship. The future of the region belongs to all its people, including those who, by virtue of their financial situation, cannot attend such a university. AUB has the chance of putting an end to the populist discourse which treats diversity as an offense through ensuring a more diversified environment. The work that AUB has been doing in granting more students full or partial financial aid is worth the energy and the cost and must be strengthened through a collaboration with state and non-state actors including ministries, foundations and other educational institutes. It is always worth to invest in human capital, especially in those who come from a disadvantaged background. Opportunities to flourish should not be limited to include only those who have the means, they should be granted to everyone since these limitations are a collective barrier as they deprive a whole society from the impact of individuals.

We live in times full of challenges but also with opportunities. AUB could be the main source of agents of change because youth could be either the basis of a positive change or the fuel of endless conflicts. This university has surely changed my life and I want it to change the lives of others; it has not given up on me during the hardest moments and I am certain it will not give up on this region.